

Jalalabad & Eastern Afghanistan

جلال آباد و شرق افغانستان



Think of the great clichés of the Afghan character and you'll be transported to Afghanistan's rugged east. Tales of honour, hospitality and revenge abound here, as hardy fighters defend the lonely mountain passes that lead to the Indian subcontinent. For Afghan, read Pashtun: the dominant ethnic group in the east whose tribal links spill across the border deep into Pakistan.

Jalalabad is the region's most important city. Founded by the Mughals as a winter retreat, it sits in an area with links back to when Afghanistan was a Buddhist country and a place of monasteries, pilgrims and prayer wheels. Sweltering in summer, you can quench your thirst with a mango juice before heading for the cooler climes of the Kabul Plateau, via the jaw-dropping Tangi Gharu Gorge.

A stone's throw from Jalalabad is the Khyber Pass, the age-old gateway to the Indian subcontinent. Getting your passport stamped here as you slip between Afghanistan and Pakistan is to experience one of Asia's most evocative border crossings. If you've been in Afghanistan a while, you might find the sudden Pakistani insistence on providing you with an armed guard for your onward journey a little bemusing.

Sadly much of the east remains out of bounds to travellers. The failures of post-conflict reconstruction have allowed an Islamist insurgency to smoulder among the peaks and valleys that dominate this part of the country. The beautiful woods and slopes of Nuristan – long a travellers' grail – remain as distant a goal as ever and the current climate means that carefully checking security issues remains paramount before any trip to the region.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy the orange blossom of the many gardens in **Jalalabad** (p182)
- Cross the iconic **Khyber Pass** (p185), the gateway to Peshawar in Pakistan
- Take in the shade of the Mughal gardens at **Nimla** (p184)





CLIMATE

The plains of the east are hot and dry in the summer, although Jalalabad catches a lot of humidity which can make it a sticky place from mid-June to early September, with temperatures pushing over 30°C. Winters are cool and fall below freezing in the mountains, with snow on the high peaks, including the wooded slopes of Nuristan.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A recently repaved highway runs from Kabul through eastern Afghanistan to Jalalabad and the Pakistan border at Torkham. There are plentiful transport connections along this corridor. Crossing the border into Pakistan is pretty straightforward – an early enough start can see you have breakfast in Kabul and dinner in Peshawar.

JALALABAD

جلال آباد

Jalalabad, Afghanistan's largest eastern city and the capital of Nangahar province, lies roughly equidistant between Kabul and the

Pakistan border at Torkham. It sits in the lee of the Safed Koh Mountains in a fertile plain watered by the Kabul river. Compared to the capital it's something of a green oasis, warm in winter but hot and sticky in summer.

The winter climate meant that Jalalabad was a popular retreat for Afghan rulers since it was founded by the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1570. The region's historical importance predates Islam however. Between the 2nd and 7th centuries AD, the Gandharan culture of the Kushans flourished in the Jalalabad valley and it was a place of pilgrimage rivalling Bamiyan. Nearby, Hadda was a hugely important complex of monasteries and caves used as monk's retreats can be seen on the far side of the river when leaving Jalalabad for Kabul. Islam arrived when Mahmud of Ghazni tore through to India in the 11th century, and much of the area's subsequent history was tied precisely to controlling the route to the subcontinent through the Khyber Pass.

Jalalabad was a British garrison during the First Anglo-Afghan War and received the one survivor of the disastrous retreat

from Kabul in 1842 (see boxed text, p32). Just over 150 years later, the mujaheddin launched an equally disastrous attack on Jalalabad, their first attempt to capture a major city from the government after the Soviet withdrawal. Over 10,000 people died. From 1992 Jalalabad was ruled by a council of mujaheddin called the Nangahar Shura, but the predominantly Pashtun population meant that the city surrendered to the Taliban in 1996 without a fight.

Several of the *shura* leaders returned to power at the close of 2001 and have been heavily implicated in the opium trade for which Nangahar is renowned. Despite this, a provincial ban in 2005 met with popular support and a 96% drop in cultivation. A failure to follow up with alternative livelihood programmes meant that the poppies were back in bloom the following year.

Many people zip through Jalalabad when passing between Kabul and Peshawar. If you've come from Pakistan the city seems like a continuation of the large Pashtun towns of North West Frontier Province, down to the street food and the make of autorickshaws. The heat and humidity can make Jalalabad exhausting in summer and malaria is a serious risk. It's also essential to take note of the political forecast, as the city sits in the heart of the Pashtun areas.

ORIENTATION

Jalalabad runs east-west along the south bank of the Kabul river, and is roughly laid out in a grid. The main junction to orientate yourself by is Chowk-e Mukharabat. The main road leads west from here past the Spinghar Hotel towards Kabul. The main commercial area runs south of the junction to Chowk-e Bazari and Chowk-e Talashi, from where the main road heads east to the airport and the Pakistan border. AIMS (www.aims.org.af) produces an excellent downloadable map of Jalalabad.

INFORMATION

Moneychangers, internet cafés and PCOs can all be found clustered between Chowk-e Mukharabat and Chowk-e Talashi.

ANSO East (☎ 070 606601)

Jalalabad Public Hospital (Sarakh-e Kabul) Next to Spinghar Hotel, with plenty of pharmacies in the immediate area.

Kabul Bank (near Chowk-e Talashi)

Police (☎ 079 9048 154)

SIGHTS

A rule follows that wherever an Afghan ruler settles, he lays out a ceremonial garden. As a favoured winter residence, Jalalabad has several, in varying degrees of maintenance. Akbar's original gardens have long been lost to urban development. The remainder lie between Chowk-e Mukharabat and the Spinghar Hotel.

The **Seraj-ul Emorat Gardens** (Bagh-e Seraj ul-Emorat) are named for the palace of King Habibullah ('Building of Light'), built in the confines of the garden in 1910. The palace was reduced to a shell during the 1929 tribal uprising but the gardens remain a pleasant place for a walk. There are plenty of orange trees for which Jalalabad was once famed and the park still hosts the Mushaira Festival in mid-April, celebrating the blossoming of the orange trees with poetry, storytelling, music and picnics.

Habibullah loved Jalalabad and, ever the moderniser, built the country's first golf course here. When he was assassinated here in 1919, the course was turned into the grounds for his **mausoleum**. Built in the same weird neoclassical style of the time, it also houses the tombs of King Amanullah and his wife Queen Soraya, *doyenne* of Afghan feminism. The gardens are opposite Seraj-ul Emorat.

Between Seraj-ul Emorat and the Kabul river is the peaceful **Kawkab Garden** (Bagh-e Kawkab), planted with roses. A new garden, **Bagh-e Abdul Haq**, is also being laid out here to commemorate the mujaheddin leader Abdul Haq who was killed by the Taliban in 2001. It sits by the Pul-Behsud bridge which leads north to Kunar province. Sunset views of the river here are lovely.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Eastern Afghanistan remains unstable. Security is generally good along the Kabul-Jalalabad-Torkham highway, although extreme caution should be taken around the traditionally problematic Sarobi area and the approaches into Kabul. Take appropriate security precautions in and around Jalalabad city.

We advise against travel off the main highway, due to the large numbers of armed anti-government groups in the region.

SLEEPING & EATING

Spinghar Hotel (☎ 070 604700; Sarakh-e Kabul; r with/without bathroom US\$40/20) This large state-run hotel is set in large gardens in the centre of town. Everyone has stayed here at one point, from Soviet officers to the Taliban's Arab cohorts. Most rooms are en suite and are decent-sized if unexciting. There's a basic restaurant and the shady trees are good for escaping Jalalabad's summer heat.

Nawa Guesthouse (near Chowk-e Mukharabat; r 200Afg; ☎) A basic guesthouse with six tidy rooms and a helpful manager. It's centrally located, near the main moneychangers' area. Food is available, as is hot water (on request).

There are a host of cheap hotels in Jalalabad around Chowk-e Mukharabat, Chowk-e Talashi and the main road east but they are currently extremely reluctant to take foreign guests, citing security concerns. Dotted in between them you'll also find lots of cheap restaurants and chaikhans. Among the *pulao* and green tea, look for *chapli kabab*, a Pashtun speciality of ground lamb made into a burger and shallow-fried with a sprinkling of spices. In summer, fresh mango and sugar-cane juice make fantastic thirst-quenchers.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Jalalabad airport is 4km east of the city limits on the road to Torkham. There are no commercial flights, but Pactec has a service to Kabul. The airport is just past the army base, home to the British garrison of 1841. General Elphinstone, leader of the doomed retreat from Kabul is buried here, although his grave has been long-lost.

Minibuses to Kabul (200Afg, three hours) and the border at Torkham (200Afg, 2½ hours) leave regularly throughout the day. Shared taxis are faster but more expensive. Note that transport to Kabul terminates at Begrami Motor Park on the outskirts of the city. The road to Kabul is particularly attractive, following the Kabul River past Sarobi Dam and up the stupendous Tangi Gharu Gorge to the Kabul Plateau. The road has recently been rehabilitated and is excellent quality.

Rickshaws are popular for getting around Jalalabad, but not all roads are paved so they can be a very bumpy experience. Most fares will be under 50Afg.

AROUND JALALABAD

Always check the local security situation before travelling off the Torkham-Jalalabad-Kabul highway.

Hadda

The loss of Hadda remains one of the most grievous disasters to have befallen Afghanistan's cultural heritage since the Soviet invasion. For 500 years to the 7th century AD, Hadda was a major Buddhist pilgrimage site, with a city that was supported by a host of monasteries. The Buddha himself visited the area to rid it of a vengeful dragon demon and several important relics were kept in the monasteries that sprang up as a result, including his staff, robe, one of his teeth and even part of his skull (which according to a 5th-century Chinese pilgrim was entirely covered with gold leaf and precious stones). Pilgrims venerating such holy items were taxed heavily.

Over 1000 stupas were recorded by 20th-century archaeologists in an area covering 15 square kilometres. The most notable was the Teppe Shotor complex, which contained a wealth of carved plaster frescoes and statuary that showed the richness of Kushan culture, freely mixing classical Greek and Indian styles to produce uniquely beautiful Afghan art. Some of the oldest-known Buddhist manuscripts were also found at Hadda. It was the pearl of Afghan archaeological sites.

War destroyed Hadda. The nearby caves once used by monks were favoured as refuges by the mujaheddin and the area was comprehensively bombed by the Soviets. What remained was looted, including most of the excavated artefacts held at the Kabul Museum. Under the Taliban, Hadda was given over to the Arab-Afghans for *jihadi* training purposes and locals were banned from visiting. Today, Afghanistan's celebrated Buddhist site is little more than dust.

Nimla Gardens

These **gardens** (Nimla Bagh) 40km from Jalalabad were laid out in 1610 by the Mughal emperor Jehangir. They follow the quartered *Chahar Bagh*-style of classical Mughal gardens, with beds of plants and trees given order by the addition of terraces, straight paths and channels of water punctuated by fountains. The design echoes the more

celebrated Shalimar Bagh in Srinagar, Kashmir, also laid out at this time by Jehangir for his wife Nur Jahan. At Nimla, Nur Jahan is said to have supervised much of the actual planting. As in Srinagar, cypress and chinara trees play an important role in the garden's design.

Until recently much neglected, the gardens have been rehabilitated by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), although the water channels remain dry. FAO has been working here and elsewhere on extensive nursery and reforestation programmes to repopulate Afghanistan's denuded orchards.

Nimla is southwest of Jalalabad off the Kabul road. The route passes through the village of Sultanpur, where there is a temple dedicated to Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism. In mid-April, Afghan Sikhs and Hindus visit the temple for its Waisak festival. The village of Gandamak is 11km from Nimla, where the British army made its last desperate (and doomed) stand in January of 1842.

Tora Bora

The Tora Bora cave complex in the Spinghar Mountains are a bone-rattling three-hour drive from Jalalabad near the Pakistan border. They became notorious at the end of 2001 as the place where Osama Bin Laden made his last stand in the teeth of an American assault before slipping into hiding. Tora Bora held a series of underground tunnels and bunkers used by the mujaheddin during the anti-Soviet Jihad. The area was heavily bombed by the Americans, who

were reluctant to put boots on the ground. Their reliance on Afghan warlord proxies ultimately allowed Bin Laden and many Al-Qaeda fighters to slip away in a haze of dust and hefty bribes, proving again the ancient adage that 'you can't buy an Afghan, you can only rent one'.

While we were researching this book, the authorities in Nangahar were making loud noises about developing Tora Bora as a tourist site, even drawing up plans to build several hotels overlooking the caves (which have largely been pounded to dust anyway, although the mountain scenery is spectacular). But as the area remains insecure and visitors require a large complement of armed guards, you probably shouldn't rush to reserve a room just yet.

Torkham

Like many border towns in this part of the world, Torkham is a scruffy place, seeming to consist of little more than auto shops, tea-houses, moneychangers and taxi touts. Only the brand new customs building displays any sense of permanence. As an introduction to Afghanistan it's mildly anarchic, although the Pakistani side is a small improvement. There's little reason to hang around other than to get your passport stamped.

As Afghanistan's busiest border post, there's plenty of transport – minibuses to Jalalabad (200Afg, 2½ hours) and Kabul (300Afg, six hours), as well as shared taxis (400Afg and 600Afg respectively). For more details of onward transport through the Khyber Pass to Peshawar in Pakistan, see p215.

THE KHYBER PASS

The road from Torkham to the Pakistani city of Peshawar traverses one of the most famous and strategically important mountain passes in the world. The Khyber Pass stretches for 50km through the Hindu Kush, linking Afghanistan to the Indian subcontinent. Babur drove his army through on his way to set up the Mughal empire and throughout history, Afghans have marauded over the pass to plunder the riches of India.

Not surprisingly, the British weren't too keen on letting the Afghans having the key to this particular back door and made sure that Peshawar and the Khyber Pass stayed on their side of the border, reinforcing it with a network of forts.

Despite this, they never truly conquered the pass itself and had to buy off the local Pashtun tribes to stop them raiding British convoys. Even today, the Pakistani government only controls the main highway – step off the tarmac and you're in tribal land. The local Afridi Pashtuns have built a second road through the pass, away from the highway, to allow them to continue their traditional smuggling unimpeded, carrying everything from opium to DVD players.

NURISTAN

نورستان

The fateful telegram 'Can you travel Nuristan June?' that kicks off Eric Newby's travel classic *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* continues to inspire travellers with dreams of high peaks and wooded mountain slopes, and villagers claiming descent from the troops of Alexander the Great. Sat hard against the Pakistan border, Nuristan was a crucible for the anti-Soviet resistance and sadly remains an important centre for anti-government elements, making it an extremely dangerous region. In a peaceful Afghanistan Nuristan could be heaven for trekkers, but for the foreseeable future all travel is to be avoided.

HISTORY

When Alexander the Great passed through Nuristan en route to India in 327 BC, he was amazed to find a city called Nyas, founded by Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, or so the occupants claimed. This they proved with their groves of ivy and grapes, and copious jars of wine. Alexander celebrated with a party that granted them independence, as well as leading to the mother of all hangovers.

The region remained aloof for most of Afghanistan's history and resisted all attempts

to subdue it. Islam failed to make a dent and the old pantheon of gods continued to hold sway. The steep passes and valleys aided Nuristan's isolation. Now known as Kafiristan ('Land of the Unbelievers'), even Timur gave up his campaign here in the 14th century. It wasn't until 1896, when Abdur Rahman Khan launched a bloody invasion, that the region was brought to heel, completing the map of modern Afghanistan. Islam was brought at the tip of a sword and Kafiristan was renamed Nuristan ('Land of Light').

Inaccessibility kept Nuristan isolated throughout most of the 20th century, with barely a road to its name. In 1978 the region was one of the first to rebel against the Afghan communist government, resulting in its heavy bombing. During the Jihad, Nuristan's proximity to the passes to Chitral in Pakistan made it a major arms conduit for the mujaheddin – traffic heavily taxed by the locals, who declared a quasi-independent state, heavily influenced by the Arab-Afghans. Local warlords grew rich on clear-cutting local forests.

Nuristan and neighbouring Kunar province have remained awkwardly independent and an important base for followers of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and elements of Al-Qaeda. The writ for the government is very short here, with little reconstruction work possible and regular US army firefighting.

GULBUDDIN HEKMATYAR

Of all the mujaheddin leaders to emerge in the 1980s, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is undoubtedly the nastiest piece of work. Ironically, this ruthless Ghilzai Pashtun fundamentalist used to be the darling of the CIA in their fight against the Soviets.

Hekmatyar (Afghans call him Gulbuddin) was a firebrand student at Kabul University in the 1970s, where he gained a reputation for throwing acid in the faces of female students; he later fled to Pakistan after his murder of a Maoist student leader. After the Soviet invasion, the ISI (Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency) found him the perfect pliable stooge. Although Hekmatyar lacked any grassroots support, the ISI bankrolled his Hezb-e Islami party to further their own Afghan agenda and encouraged the USA to do the same. Hekmatyar received hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and plenty of Stinger missiles – many of which he sold immediately to Iran. Instead of fighting the Russians, he spent his time attacking other mujaheddin groups and assassinating moderate Afghan exiles, thus pursuing his own ambition for power.

In 1992 Hekmatyar failed to capture Kabul for his Pakistani handlers and took to raining rockets down on it instead, leaving tens of thousands of civilians dead in the rubble. In a move of depressing Afghan irony, he even briefly served as prime minister while ordering the bombardment.

Pakistan eventually dropped Hekmatyar in favour of the Taliban, who exiled him to Iran in the late 1990s. He returned in the aftermath of their removal, vowing to fight the American 'Crusaders'. At the time of writing he was still at large, with his renamed Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin party exploring links with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

CULTURE

Nuristan remains ethnically and culturally distinct from the rest of Afghanistan. Nuristanis speak their own language and are frequently blonde or red-haired, with blue or green eyes. Their own stories ascribe this to their ancient Greek roots. Modern theories are more sceptical, but recent plans for DNA testing have sadly foundered.

Wood carving holds an important place in Nuristani culture. Houses frequently have elaborately carved posts and shutters, and chairs are an unusual feature in a country where most people sit on carpets. Echoes of their pagan roots can also be found in a penchant for raised wooden coffins. Islam graves were also once marked with carved effigies of gods and ancestors. An important collection remains in the Kabul Museum (p88). The tradition of winemaking also appears to have disappeared due to Quranic strictures.

The drawing of the border in the 1890s split Kafiristan in two. Against the odds,

three valleys in Pakistan have clung to their traditional religion and culture, their inhabitants known as the Kalasha.

TRAVEL IN NURISTAN

Nuristan's main town is Kamdesh, linked by a fair road through Asadabad in Kunar to Jalalabad. A second road leads into Nuristan via Mehtarlam and Daulatshah. There are few other roads – mountain tracks are the order of the day. Three main rivers drain Nuristan: the Pech, Alingar and Kunar. Important passes include the Chamar Pass (4570m) leading towards the Panjshir Valley and Mir Samir, the mountain that was the target of *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*. Others such as the Ustai lead into Pakistan.

The presence of insurgent groups such as Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin, and frequent fighting with the US army (who have a base in Kamdesh), make Nuristan an extremely dangerous destination, to be given a very wide berth. No international NGOs currently operate in the area.